



American Transcendental Philosophy and Neo-Vedantic thoughts in the Writings of Swami Vivekananda

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Abstract:

This paper examines the philosophy of transcendentalism and spiritualism, specifically Advaita Vedanta, as articulated by Swami Vivekananda. A prominent philosopher and social reformer of the 19th century, Swami Vivekananda was significantly influenced by the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and other thinkers. Upon arriving in America, he engaged with the Transcendental Movement, which represented a modified interpretation of Transcendental Idealism. His interactions with various American transcendentalists further shaped his understanding of transcendental and spiritual concepts. Through his lectures and writings, he conveyed profound philosophical insights to a global audience.

Keywords: transcendentalism, religion, spiritualism, philosophy.

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda emerged as the most remarkable figure at the Parliament of the World's Religions, which took place from September 11 to September 27, 1893, in Chicago, USA. He was recognized as the most knowledgeable participant at this gathering. His personality was not only charming and captivating but also marked by courage and profound spiritual strength. Through his intellectual contributions and distinctive approach, he captivated the Western audience. Transcendentalism, a philosophical movement associated with individualism, began in the early 19th century and encouraged individuals to liberate themselves from societal conventions in pursuit of their passions and dreams. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were instrumental in founding this movement. They posited that each person should embrace their individuality, with nature serving as a significant teacher and guide in discovering personal beliefs and the desired path in life.

What is Transcendentalism?

Transcendentalism is a philosophical movement that draws inspiration from Hinduism, highlighting the spiritual advantages derived from periods of profound contemplation rather than mere action. It signifies an exploration beyond the confines of human understanding, allowing individuals to encounter extraordinary or religious experiences. American Transcendentalism is particularly linked to the philosophical and religious views of New England intellectuals during the 19th century.

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This movement represents not merely a religious framework but a spiritual philosophy that stands in opposition to Empiricism and Rationalism. The roots of Transcendentalism can be traced back to American history, with Ralph Waldo Emerson emerging as a prominent figure in the transcendentalist movement. Within this movement, a collective of intellectuals perceived their liberal religious practices as overly formal and rational, failing to satisfy their spiritual and emotional aspirations. Essentially, the members aimed to rise above the materialistic tendencies of existence and transition from a rational perspective to a spiritual one. Transcendentalist authors guided their lives by following their intuition, choosing not to conform to rules and expectations they did not endorse. In contemporary society, the influence of transcendentalism is evident throughout modern culture. Today's writers often reflect the principles and beliefs of the transcendentalists, whether intentionally or not. Their works underscore the significance and innovation of the original transcendentalist contributions and highlight the enduring relevance of these ideals in the present day.

Swami Vivekananda and Transcendentalism:

Swami Vivekananda can be classified as a Transcendentalist in a broad context; however, his perspectives do not entirely align with those of Emerson and his contemporaries. Central to his philosophy is the concept of the divinity of the soul, which resonates with both Vedantist and Transcendentalist ideologies. The similarities between Vivekananda and figures like Emerson and Thoreau stem from the latter's inspiration drawn from Hindu scriptures. Thoreau and Emerson enriched their intellectual pursuits through the profound and cosmological teachings found in the Bhagavad Gita, while Vivekananda immersed himself in the vast ocean of Hindu sacred texts, engaging not only his intellect but also his body, mind, and spirit. Consequently, this deep engagement led to a more profound depth in his thoughts. Swami Vivekananda was an avid reader, and he was well-acquainted with the principles of Transcendentalism even prior to his arrival in America. In terms of spirituality, he advocated for the acquisition of knowledge through direct perception, a concept Emerson referred to as "intuition," which he deemed superior to rational thought. Vivekananda posited that the fundamental truths of religion, such as the existence of God and the soul, cannot be apprehended through the external senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch. One cannot perceive God through sight, nor can one physically touch Him, and it is understood that reasoning cannot extend beyond sensory experience. He elucidated that the enhancement of intuitive faculties can be achieved through yoga practices, which elevate the mind to a higher state and enable the reception of transcendental knowledge. For Vivekananda, true realization transcends sensory perception. Yogis assert that individuals can surpass their immediate sensory experiences and even their rational faculties. This inherent power exists within every individual and creature, attainable solely through dedicated practice. Through such practices, one can transcend the conventional boundaries of reason and directly grasp realities that lie beyond rational comprehension. Transcendentalists uphold the notion of free will while rejecting determinism. Free will embodies the belief that individuals are self-determined, signifying that we possess ultimate agency over our choices.

Swamiji possessed a comprehensive understanding of the Transcendentalist Movement in America. Emerson, a prominent social reformer and leader, emphasized the fundamental principles of American Transcendentalism in his four influential essays: "Self-Reliance," "Nature," "The Transcendentalist," and "The Over-Soul." The concept of Self-Reliance fosters self-sufficiency and grants individuals the freedom to uncover their authentic selves, ultimately leading to genuine independence, as all knowledge originates from self-awareness. The thoughts and writings of Vivekananda significantly impacted India's independence movement. Activists such as Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Aurobindo Ghose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Bagha Jatin, along with intellectuals

like Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, and Romain Rolland, drew inspiration from Vivekananda's work. The enthusiastic embrace of yoga in the West can be attributed to practices such as Transcendental meditation and other forms of Indian spiritual self-improvement. Swami Vivekananda asserted that all religions offer distinct paths leading to the same ultimate goal.

Swami Vivekanand and Spiritualism:

In his philosophical discourse, Vivekananda articulated that the core of Hinduism is most effectively encapsulated in the Advaita Vedanta philosophy of Adi Shankara. Contrary to the principles of Advaita Vedanta, Vivekananda embraced the belief in both immanent and transcendent realities. His interpretation of neo-Advaita paves the way for an understanding of both Dvaita, or dualism, and Advaita, or non-dualism. Vivekananda emphasized a modern and universal interpretation of Vedanta, advocating that individuals should prioritize their own will over societal norms and expectations, allowing their intuitions or instincts to guide them rather than external teachings. He posited that the presence of God is most profoundly experienced through intuition rather than through rational thought. Vivekananda asserted that every soul possesses inherent divinity, with the primary objective being the manifestation of this divinity by mastering both external and internal nature. This mastery can be achieved through various means, including work, worship, mental discipline, or philosophical inquiry. His teachings placed significant emphasis on nationalism, recognizing that the populace forms the foundation of a nation's future. Consequently, he elaborated on the concept of human development within his teachings, expressing a desire "to set in motion machinery which will bring the noblest ideas to the doorstep of even the poorest and the meanest." In his teachings, Vivekananda encouraged his followers to embody holiness, selflessness, and fidelity. He exemplified numerous virtuous qualities such as purity, truthfulness, selflessness, and moral integrity, all while maintaining control over the mind. He regarded brahmacharya as the source of both physical and mental resilience. Vivekananda defined success as the outcome of focused thought and deliberate action, underscoring the significance of this interplay for a fulfilling life. He elaborated on his perspective regarding a successful existence in numerous lectures, stating, "Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life, think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success; that is the way great souls."

Vivekananda emerged as a prominent figure in the Neo-Vedanta movement. He skillfully integrated various elements of Hinduism with Western esoteric traditions, notably Transcendentalism, New Thought, and Theosophy. His efforts were instrumental in fostering a renewed understanding and appreciation of Hinduism both within India and beyond its borders. Vivekananda played a pivotal role in invigorating the national movement across India. His contributions significantly advanced the awakening of the nation, as he emphasized the critical issue of poverty and its connection to national consciousness. His nationalistic perspectives left a lasting impact on numerous Indian thinkers and leaders who drew inspiration from his vision.

Conclusion:

Swami Vivekananda stands as a prominent reformer and transcendentalist who played a pivotal role in spiritually awakening India while preserving the essence of Hinduism by challenging antiquated traditions. His philosophies and insights inspired not only the citizens of India but also individuals across the globe. He consistently advocated for education as a means of retrospective, prospective, and constructive development for societal advancement. Through his speeches and literary works, he articulated a worldview that harmonized Advaita Vedanta with contemporary scientific thought and modern principles of justice, equality, and freedom. His remarkable contributions to

uplifting India through spiritual empowerment and the promotion of peace and love were significant. Through his writings and endeavours, he fostered indigenous concepts and established a cultural and spiritual identity for India.

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